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DOI:

[10.1093/fs/knw166](https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/knw166)

Document Version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Ffrench, R. P. (2016). Renoir's Automaton, Vigo's puppet: Automatism and Movement in La règle du jeu and L'atalante. *French Studies*, LXX(4), 535-549. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/knw166>

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**RENOIR'S AUTOMATON, VIGO'S PUPPET: AUTOMATISM AND MOVEMENT
IN *LA RÈGLE DU JEU* AND *L'ATALANTE******Abstract***

Renoir's 1939 film *La Règle du jeu* incorporates several automata as indexes of the alienated status of the class it depicts, including the *orchestrion* which the main protagonist Robert de la Chesnaye unveils as the ultimate piece in his collection. This focus on machines is as much an expression of the film's 18th-century philosophical and aesthetic references as it is a revelation of an anachronistic relation to the machine as such, and to the form of movement it embodies. In a key scene of the film the display of the orchestrion falters, revealing a deathly repetition which the moribund pseudo-aristocracy cannot accommodate. The opposition drawn by Lacan between automaton and *tuché* in his 11th seminar, as well as Deleuze's intimation of the 'crack' in the filmic crystal that Renoir's cinema deploys, illuminate this moment as the event of pure repetition. In contrast, Jean Vigo's 1934 film *L'Atalante* depicts a human-machine relation that allows for forms of connection and innovation of a more organic nature. Across these representations of automatism and movement, the cinema of the 1930s explores patterns of alienation and of historicity, for which the theses of Walter Benjamin provide a powerful interpretative framework.

'Each epoch dreams the one to follow'. This is Jules Michelet, as cited by Walter Benjamin, in the essay 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth-century'.¹ Benjamin adds that these dreams leave residues, in which one can trace the conditions from which the present has emerged; a past age dreamt of its future, and in the trace left by this dream we may read the fore-image

¹ Walter Benjamin, 'Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth-Century' in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 4.

of the present. It follows that past presents also comprise a complex hetero-chronology, in which now reified relics of former phantasmagoria embody a double-image of the modes of production contemporary to that present. In this article I will explore the thesis that the antiquated automata, clockwork machines, puppets, and trinkets which populate Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* (1939) and Vigo's *L'Atalante* (1934) function as phantasmatic indexes to the economic and social relations of the mid- to late-1930s. In doing so I follow a precedent established by Renoir specialist Christopher Faulkner in article which focuses on the historicity of the automata in *La Règle du jeu* and touches briefly on *L'Atalante* by way of comparison.² But I will pursue this comparison further, and also draw on a range of theoretical frameworks, themselves machines of a sort, in order to pursue the social and material fortunes of these objects, and to point to contrasting approaches between the two texts. My main focus will be on *La Règle du jeu*, with *L'Atalante* employed as a counterpoint to Renoir's inexhaustibly fascinating diagnosis of a corrupt class, oblivious to impending disaster.

Figurations of diverse machines function as dialectical images (in Benjamin's sense) of the social machine; in the 'Convolutés' of his *Passagenwerk* Benjamin draws together, in the fragmentary mode typical of his work, a series of observations on the doll and the automaton.³ He cites a letter from Marx to Engels of January 1863 in which the former draws attention to the influence of the two mechanisms of the clock and the mill in the development of industrial production in Europe.⁴ Marx points to the 18th century inventor James de

² Christopher Faulkner, 'Musical Automata, *La Règle du jeu*, and the Cinema', *South Central Review*, 28 (3), Fall 2011, 6-25.

³ Benjamin, 'The Doll, The Automaton' in *op.cit.*, 693-97.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 695-96.

Vaucanson, pioneer of automata both as high-society entertainments and as philosophical toys, as a decisive influence on the 'imagination of English invention' and thus on the development of the industrial mode of production.⁵ In fact Vaucanson's mechanisms – including the infamous duck – were the first of many examples of clockwork automata that enjoyed significant popularity in the 18th century, and occasioned intense philosophical debate. As Gaby Wood points out in *Living Dolls*, the end of the century and the beginning of the next saw a shift whereby automata ceased to become objects of curiosity and wonder for the upper classes and began to influence and be incorporated into modes of production.⁶

This hetero-chronology proposes that the industrial mode of production, in which humans become the appendages of machines, is a return, in the real, of the phantasmagoric automata invented, dreamed and imagined in the previous epoch.⁷ The inventions of the 18th-century offer a spectral fore-image of what will become a mode of production in the 19th; Vaucanson's dreams became the economic reality of the future. The phantasmagoric status of automata does not disappear, however, but persists now as a fetishized reminder of the pre-industrial culture of the 18th-century; the automata now collected or lodged in museums, or

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Gaby Wood, *Living Dolls: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), xviii.

⁷ One might accordingly see these automata as prefigurations of Donna Haraway's *cyborg* or of other configurations of 'post-human' relations between human and machine. See Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto; Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181 and Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 89-95.

still functioning in the cultural arena, are remnants or relics which function as images of epochal discontinuities. What originated as an object of wonder and curiosity returns in its 20th-century version as an anachronistic index of the historical past, as an object of collection or of *divertissement*, but one which also comprises the spectre of the industrial and human automatism of the present, a spectre which, in its time, was *to-come* (*à-venir*), but which, in its reified return, points to *that-which-has-already-come* (*ce qui est déjà (ad)venu*). As a collectable object the automata now signifies, but negatively, through what Benjamin would describe as an after-image, the world of automotised industrial production; it is haunted by the economic substratum of labour and production which it at the same time forecloses.

Robert de la Chesnaye, in Jean Renoir's 1939 film *La Règle du jeu* is a 20th-century version of the self-styled collector of clockwork musical instruments and sophisticated automata which as Faulkner observes refer directly to the 18th century, among other layers of history, in a complex genealogy.⁸ The glorious pinnacle of Robert's career as a collector

⁸ Rose-Marie Godier's book *L'Automate et le cinema* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005) explicitly addresses the theme of automata in *La Règle du jeu*, alongside two further chapters on Mankiewicz's *Le Limier (Sleuth)* and Bresson's *Pickpocket*. In addition to Faulkner, an earlier consideration of the automata in the film features in Jeanne Dupuy, 'Le Dérèglement des mécanismes dans *La Règle du jeu*' in *Analyses et réflexions sur Jean Renoir: La Règle du jeu* (Paris: ellipses, 1998). Among other established critical sources on Renoir's film of particular note are: Alexander Sesonke, *Jean Renoir: The French Films 1924-1939* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1980); André Bazin, *Jean Renoir* (Paris: Gérard Lebovici, 1989); Keith Reader, *La Règle du jeu* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010); Martin O'Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). More recently Colin Davis's *Scenes of Love and Murder: Renoir, Film and Philosophy* (London:

occurs as he unveils a grandiose mechanical orchestra machine in the course of the party sequence known as 'Walpurgisnacht'. This object is a species of the 'orchestron', a mechanical organ featuring several instrumental sounds produced through the use of shaped reeds and flutes and the one in Renoir's film is a variant of the 'Limonaire', made by Limonaire Frères et Cie.⁹ This machine is just one of the ways in which, without any explicit deixis of the wider social and historical fabric of France and Europe at this critical juncture of

Wallflower Press, 2009) attends to Stanley Cavell's reading of the film in the 'enlarged edition' of *The World Viewed* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1979), and to Wittgenstein's notion of rules.

⁹ Faulkner gives precise detail in 'Musical Automata': 'The instrument that we see in the film is a Gavioli (the name just discernable on the face of the instrument), manufactured in Paris by Ludovic Gavioli, a native of Modena, who set up in business in France in 1845 with his two sons. The Gavioli family business survived into the early years of the twentieth century, until it was absorbed by Limonaire Frères, which itself effectively ceased business in 1918. Robert's orchestron dates from some time after 1870, when the firm first started using the name Gavioli & Cie, and it operates by the system of perforated cards to produce then recorded music' (14). Godier suggests that the social origins of the orchestron displayed by Robert already point to the inauthenticity of his collection: 'Ce qui constitue "l'aboutissement de la carrière du collectionneur" du Marquis n'est pas à proprement parler un des fabuleux automates du XVIIème siècle, qui renverrait immédiatement à l'harmonie préétablie de Leibniz, il s'agit d'une machine très populaire, qui accompagnait habituellement les manages de foire. [...] L'ironie de Renoir s'exerce ici avec une verve d'autant plus vigoureuse qu'il y a fort à parier que l'instrument du Marquis, avec son effigie, provient vraisemblablement d'une maison close,' (*L'Automate et le cinéma*, 41).

1939, Renoir incorporates into the film encrypted references to or after-images of the class system and modes of production. As a reification of automatism the orchestrion operates as a mirror both of the alienation of Robert's class from the real world of class division and industrial production, and of the strictly regulated 'clockwork' functioning of human relations within their circle.

Robert's kitsch fantasy of 18th-century aristocratic leisure via his collection also chimes with Renoir's 18th-century sources for the film. After the naturalistic and romantic features of *La Bête humaine*, Renoir sought a more classical and altogether cooler critical aesthetic in baroque music and in the theatre of Marivaux and Beaumarchais.¹⁰ The rigorous observation of social relations in the comedy of manners shows a society functioning 'like clockwork', a metaphor which had generated much reflection on the part of earlier philosophers like Descartes and Leibniz, not to mention La Mettrie and Condillac. Leibniz's proposition of the 'pre-established harmony' of the universe and of its engineer as a 'blind watchmaker', and the ordered logic of baroque music undoubtedly consolidate the 18th century as a reference point for regularity and automatism in human affairs, and thus emphasise the historical anachronisms operating in *La Règle du jeu*. Renoir's 20th-century film, however, introduces a glitch in the mechanism; the comedic play of the social machine is threatened with disintegration, revealing a more deathly and potentially tragic, brutally real substratum.

¹⁰ The explicit pre-text for *La Règle du jeu* is in fact Alfred de Musset's 1833 play *Les Caprices de Marianne*, but the film appeals to Beaumarchais through its epigraph and implicitly to the theatre of the 18th-century through its intrigue. Godier argues that through filtering an 18th-century aesthetic through a 19th century frame Renoir introduces a tragic element into an otherwise comedic performance (*L'Automate et le cinéma*, 32-35).

The film plays upon the contrast between different types of machine. The *désœuvré* aristocrat Robert, collector of mechanical toys, is distinguished from his would be cuckold André Jurieu, hero of transatlantic flight, through the latter's association with the definitively 20th century machines of aeroplane and car; Jurieu is a distinctly modern hero. The different types of machines, with their different modes of human interaction and operation, figure differences in social styles and epochs; Robert's automata only require their human agent to set them off, while Jurieu literally inhabits 'his' machines, and is filmed inside them or emerging from their interior. In contrast to Robert's reification of the automata through his collection, Jurieu is literally and metaphorically accommodated (and often visually framed) by the car and the aeroplane. He has come to what we might call a working arrangement with the machine, to the extent that he gracefully deflects responsibility for the triumph of his transatlantic flight onto the plane. We might further illustrate this point by pointing to the role of machines in Vigo's *L'Atalante* (which will also return further on). The machine in *L'Atalante* is not, as it is in *La Règle du jeu*, a mechanism whose regularity and inflexibility mirrors the functioning of social groups and individuals within them; it is a humanized and subjectivized factor, most manifest in the form of the barge which Jean has to coax or seduce into motion. 'L'Atalante' is both the home and the workplace of the film's protagonists. Here also the machine literally accommodates the human, and the human bodies who inhabit and employ it have themselves accommodated it, negotiated a partnership with it. For Robert de la Chesnaye and his guests this kind of relation is possible only with the weapons they shoot with. In *La Règle du jeu* the machine functions as an index of a historical consciousness of the anachronistic survival of a decadent class in contrast with a modernity with which it is 'out of joint', in relation to which the human body appears as a redundant appendage.

The automata of *La Règle du jeu* thus function as coherent symbolisations of the psychological and moral alienation of a moribund class. Robert is a self-designated collector

of musical automata, and surrounds himself with his acquisitions. The regular mechanisms of his machines provide a welcome antidote to the chaotic and unpredictable nature of his emotional attachments, which they also fetishise. Faulkner writes that 'What is immediately telling is the way in which the mechanical instruments which Robert sets in motion serve to project his anxieties about the extent of his control over his emotional world'.¹¹ This anxiety has a wider dimension, however; Colin Davis has argued that the apparently transparent title of the film – the rule of the game – in fact hides a deeper and more enigmatic proposition: everyone agrees that one must abide by the rules of the game but no-one knows what they are. In *Scenes of Love and Murder* Davis takes issue with the assumption that Renoir's film concerns a society bound by obedience to 'the rules of the game', rules which Jurieu transgresses, or codes of which he is deliberately or involuntarily ignorant. Davis focuses instead on Robert, and through a perspective drawn from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, proposes that Renoir shows us a social milieu which is able to pretend that it is following the rules while re-inventing them to suit its purposes.¹² Robert reveals himself to be adept at inventing new rules for himself and his household and passing them off as the old ones. While Robert indulges and explores the transgression of rules and limits of which he is uncertain (there being no content to the Law), the decorative performance of his automata functions only according to a strictly regulated pattern, deviation from which provokes disaster. The regularity of the play of the automata, in contrast to the unpredictability of unregulated human behaviour, functions as a kind of negative index of the 'bending of the rules' which Robert and his class indulge.

¹¹ Faulkner, 'Musical Automata', 9.

¹² See Davis, *Scenes of Love and Murder*, 100-114.

Several sequences towards the opening of the film bear this out: the infantile reassurance that writes itself across Robert's features as he plays with one of the mechanisms just prior to telephoning Geneviève to break with her; the manic search for the key to his warbling nightingale, his jubilant and neurotic, repeated, protest that it will sing 'toutes les vingt secondes', while Octave seeks a private tête-à-tête with Christine so as to arrange an assignation for his friend Jurieu. These juxtapositions suggest that Robert has recourse to his automata as an antidote to the instability and unpredictability of human others, which he both promotes and enjoys. The ordered mechanisms of the automata also offer a symbolic key to the functioning of social relations. Robert's class persists in the illusion that everything is permitted, as long as it remains within the 'rules of the game', but these rules are without content. The rules of the social game are stretched by the loose morality and superficial ethics which Robert and Christine allow themselves and indulge in others, but when they threaten to come apart, due to this very laxity, the mechanism reasserts itself. Octave steps back from spontaneous elopement with Christine when he is made to confront the financial insecurity of such a deviation from the norm. Robert and Jurieu's physical confrontation is mutually defused when its near-mock violence threatens to spill over the limits of convention. Jurieu's death is resolved as an accident, permitting Robert and Christine to return to order in the eyes of their guests. Renoir paints in this class the fragile illusion, maintained ultimately at the cost of a death, a sacrifice, that social relations function like automata, an amusing *divertissement* which is nevertheless supported and driven by a regular and unchanging, unchangeable pattern.

This account resonates with Deleuze's assessment of Renoir's 'pessimism' in *La Règle du jeu*.¹³ Deleuze identifies in Renoir's films and in *La Règle du jeu* in particular a 'circuit' between the living beings and the automata, whereby both are different facets of a 'crystal' of time, in which the actual is constantly exchanged for the virtual, and vice versa: 'C'est la profondeur de champ, par exemple dans "La Règle du jeu" qui assure un emboîtement de cadres, une cascade de miroirs, un système de rimes entre maîtres et valets, vivants et automates, theatre et réalité, actuel et virtuel'.¹⁴ Deleuze takes issue with André Bazin's interpretation of the role and effect of depth of field in Renoir, suggesting that it is not in support of greater realism, but in order to facilitate the constant exchange of the different facets of the crystal. This use of depth of field, facilitating the exchange Deleuze proposes, is particularly evident in the revelation of the orchestrion, where Robert stands in front of it, and the audience and spectators alike witness the interplay of human and automata, and in many other instances of the film, in which images and roles are incessantly doubled, and exchanges performed between one side and the other of the double. But Deleuze adds, significantly, that the crystal, in Renoir, is flawed or cracked: 'Chez Renoir, le cristal n'est jamais pur et parfait, il a une faille, un point de fuite, un "crapaud"'.¹⁵ Deleuze proposes that it is Schumacher the gamekeeper who is 'out of line', who is the one who breaks the rules, and who thus constitutes the 'crack' in the procession of mirrors, 'qui fait éclater le

¹³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L'Image-temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), 114. For a broadly-based reading of Renoir's films from a Deleuzian perspective, see Richard Rushton, 'A Deleuzian Imaginary: The Films of Jean Renoir' in *Deleuze Studies*, Volume 5, (2) 2011: *Schizoanalysis and Visual Culture*, 241-60.

¹⁴ Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, 113.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

cristal fêlé et en fait fuir le contenu, à coup de fusil'.¹⁶ In Renoir's other films, Deleuze proposes, the 'crack', the transgression, often allows something else to appear, which will allow a different trajectory, a different becoming. *La Règle du jeu*, he concludes, is pessimistic insofar as the crack which interrupts the circuitry ends only in a death and a return to order, the suturing of the crack.

Working with Deleuze's notion of the flaw in the crystal, I want to follow a slightly different line. From where, and why, does the crack emerge, in *La Règle du jeu*? Is it from within the very processes of exchange, role-switching, the play of mirrors of the film? Or is it, we might ask, because of the confrontation of this order of free exchange with the order of the Law? Different interpretations of the 'rule' of the game come into play here, which we might identify with the contrasting economies of free exchange, and the more feudal system of territorial rights. Robert, like Gide's Michel, in *L'Immoraliste*, wants to play both sides of the fence; as the landowner he is able to indulge the poacher who steals off his own land, thus effectively to steal from himself, at the expense of the agent of his Law, or of the Law, the gamekeeper.¹⁷ The 'crack' occurs in the disjunction between the play of Robert's game, the circuit he establishes on his own territory, and the rules of property which Schumacher defends, which it is his role to defend, paradoxically in Robert's name. Schumacher is the 'game – keeper', if one can allow a poor play on words; he must keep the property, and keep to the rule of law, but he cannot alter the rule of the game. Robert is the 'master' of the game, able to alter the rules of the game, to experiment. The outcome of this

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁷ On *La Règle du jeu* and *L'Immoraliste*, see Tom Conley, 'The Laws of the Game: Jean Renoir, *La Règle du jeu*' in John Denvir (ed.) *Legal Reelism: Movies as Legal Texts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 95-117.

plot – Jurieu's death – proposes an ambivalent answer to the question of whether it is Robert or Schumacher's approach to the law, to the rules, which prevails. Robert is able to alter the rules to suit himself, but Schumacher upholds the law which forbids the transgression of rules of property and of marriage. Marceau, the agent of Robert's experimentation, and of the attempted seduction of Lisette, is the object for Schumacher of a transgression of the rule of property, animal and marital. Altering Deleuze's account slightly, we can say that the 'crack' appears because of the encounter between these two rules of the game, a differend between two legal systems, one which promotes free exchange and one which holds to property rights.¹⁸ Robert's position is ambivalent here. As landowner of La Colinière he is in a sense merely the inheritor of the established laws of property. The experiment he indulges, however, sees him inventing the law himself, acting not as placeholder for a law which he merely embodies, but as the inventor of a new system, which can manipulate the law to its own ends. He is both legislative and executive; the crack is provoked perhaps because of the incompatibility of these two positions. Or rather, the differend is between an effectively fascist (or Sadean) politics in which the law is re-invented for the pleasure or *jouissance* of the law-maker, and a politics in which the sovereign is subject to the law itself.

The crack in the crystal is also manifest, however, in the malfunctioning of Robert's orchestrion, itself provoked by Schumacher's transgressive pursuit of Marceau beyond the servant's quarters (referencing Chaplin's 1916 *The Count*), and more punctually by the butler Corneille's switching off of the mechanism. Faulkner reads this malfunction as signalling 'Robert's lack of control over his world', but also as provoking the intervention of an

¹⁸ To this extent Renoir's film is a perfect expression of the logic of capitalism as explored by Deleuze and Guattari in the two volumes of *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*. See especially *L'Anti-œdipe: capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 41-42.

uncanny dissonance which leads the film towards the derailment of its master narrative: 'The orchestrion's dissonance is the film's dissonance, so to speak'.¹⁹ While following Faulkner's argument – that this mechanical failure figures the 'failure of cinema to be enlightened and enlightening', I want to pursue further intertextual and theoretical reflections on the orchestrion's dysfunction which resonate with the Deleuzian figure of the 'crack' and take it towards others instances. I primarily read the 'crack' as auditory, an irruption into the sound track of the film rather than of its visual surfaces or in terms of the intrigue. In contrast with the comedic human performances that precede it (themselves incorporating within the aristocratic country house party a parodic – yet acutely revealing – version of popular music-hall entertainment) the huge automaton proceeds without human intervention, with Robert's inanely triumphant presence alongside it.²⁰ Close-up shots of his poignantly expressive face are intercut with close-ups of the automaton's miniature figures, whose percussive movements stridently force their way into the auditory foreground. This is a sequence rich in interpretative possibilities; the figures which emerge from the machine to strike a bell in time with the graceless and oppressive march played by the machine are obscene embodiments of the human automatism of both the aristocracy and their servants, but they also resonate with the automatism peculiar to fascism and in particular to the fascist parade, as described in Georges Bataille's near contemporary novel *Le Bleu du ciel*:

¹⁹ Faulkner, 'Musical Automata', 16, 18.

²⁰ This image is the perhaps surprising basis for a passing reference by Lacan in *Le Séminaire Livre VI: Le Désir et son interprétation*, where he points to Dalio (Robert)'s expression as indicative of the relation between shame (*pudeur*) and the object of desire (109).

D'un geste obscène, il dressait cette canne le pommeau collé au ventre (elle ressemblait alors à un pénis de singe démesuré, décoré d'une tresse de cordelettes de couleur) ; d'une saccade de sale petite brute, il élevait ensuite le pommeau à la hauteur de la bouche. Du ventre à la bouche, de la bouche au ventre, caque allée et venue hachée, saccadée par une rafale de tambours... Ce spectacle était nettement obscène et aussi en quelque sorte effrayant [...] Chaque éclat de la musique, dans la nuit, était une incantation forcenée qui appelait à la guerre et au meurtre.²¹

Given potentially anti-semitic tenor of the previous stage routine featuring four of the guests wearing bowler hats and exaggerated beards, the historical resonances, however retrospective, are hard to ignore.²² In Bataille's novel the scene appears towards the end of the narrative as the narrator Troppmann is in Vienna, in the aftermath of the Anschluss, and his commentary on the obscene spectacle of the Nazi youth parade interprets it as a premonitory sign of war and death. In similar fashion, what seems to be presented in the Walpurgisnacht sequences and the party routines at La Colinière is something like an

²¹ Georges Bataille, *Le Bleu du ciel* (Paris: Gallimard, 'L'Imaginaire', 1957). Bataille's novel was written in 1935 but published 22 years later.

²² Keith Reader, in *La Règle du jeu* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010) discusses a range of alternative interpretations of this scene (66-7). His own article 'Chaos, Contradiction and Order in Jean Renoir's *La Règle du jeu*', in *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 23 (1) January-April 1999, analyses the rich seams of association implicit in the scene and the song 'Nous avons l've le pied', an account which makes it appear less explicitly anti-semitic. Martin O'Shaughnessy, in *Jean Renoir* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), says of this scene: 'Frivolity collides with deadly seriousness as an indigenous tradition of anti-Semitism is evoked even while Jews face intensifying persecution in Germany' (p. 149).

intimation of the future, an encoded sense of foreboding introduced by Renoir through which one senses the impending destruction that faces this class and nation; if a dream is a fulfilment of a wish, the epoch here is willing its own destruction. This is made more emphatic through the chillingly effective *danse macabre* routine which has also featured prior to the orchestrion display, which signifies forward to the destruction of the war, and backward to the somnambulistic figures of earlier cinema (Feuillade's *Les Vampires* or Wiene's *Caligari*, for example), and to the skeletally illuminated athletic figures Etienne-Jules Marey employed to fix and analyse the image of the moving body in the late 19th century.²³ But beyond these premonitory signs, which may come to light only with the virtue of hindsight, what my parallel between Bataille's Nazi parade and Renoir's orchestrion suggests is that there is a core of obscenity at the heart of the regulated performance of the machine, an obscenity which is ironically staged frontally in both instances.

This is brought home with acuity further on: as Robert goes off to join the chase for his errant wife, the automaton continues its play. Later, however, as Schumacher pursues Marceau with pistol shots through the crowd of guests, and the butler switches it off, the mechanism stutters, and the resulting sound is that of a repetitive juddering, somewhat like a record player stuck in the same groove but altogether more industrial and less nostalgic: it is the sound of bare mechanical repetition. Here the 'amusing' *divertissement* of the apparatus falls away to reveal the fundamental nature of the machine, its repetitive pulse, without the narrative movement which the music and the show of the automaton overlays upon it. The bare pulse of repetition which becomes audible through the glitch in the automaton's

²³ On Marey, see François Dagognet, *Etienne-Jules Marey: A Passion for the Trace* (New York: Zone Books, 1992); Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey 1830-1904* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992).

mechanism allows for various interpretations. To refer to it as a pulse may be to endow it with characteristics which are all too human, to anthropomorphize it, or perhaps to excessively embody it, since it is not a question of an underlying corporeal rhythm which we might relate to Freud's pleasure principle, to the pulsatile movement of desire or of the sensory apparatus. This repetitive clunk is the sound of arrested movement rather than continuous rhythm. Its violence is due to the sensation of an annulment of time as continuity, the thrusting forward of the recurrent and static instant. While we may look instead to Freud's compulsion to repeat, thus to the death drive, death, here, is not the 'state of rest' towards which the organism is taking a 'circuitous path', so much as the inflexible return of the same instant, repetition without the compulsion or the pulse.²⁴ The stuttering of the automata reveals therefore not a corporeal rhythm so much as the purely mechanical juddering of a mechanism. Its after-echoes are the repetitive stamping of automotive industrial processes and the intermittent explosions of aerial bombardment, but also the mechanism of the cinematic camera or projector as its claw moves the strip through the gate, a sound usually inaudible to the cinema audience.

At the (literal and figurative) heart, then, of the automata, behind their decorative surfaces and performances, is a mechanical repetition with which human actors cannot negotiate, which they cannot accommodate. This is a further instance of the 'crack' in the crystal which in Deleuze's reading interrupts the exchange of images, and the double between the human and the automaton. The social fabric depicted in the film is woven around and over this element in which we might also recognise the characteristics of the Lacanian Real – that which always returns in the same place -, but it intervenes nonetheless to signify the

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1917) in *The Penguin Freud Library*, Vol. 11: *On Metapsychology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 311.

contingent superficiality and morbidity of this social class, the fact that it is effectively *out of joint*, in a way that is more effective as a threat than Jurieu's petulant and ultimately compliant protest.²⁵ In the intrusive thud of the arrested machine one might also hear what Laura Mulvey refers to with the title of her book *Death 24x a second*, the serial return of the photogram which is the cinema's material support, moved through the clockwork mechanism of the projector with such exact regularity as to induce the illusion of continuous (human) movement.²⁶ This argument is supported if seen through the lens of Lacan's distinction between *tuché* and *automaton*, in his eleventh seminar. While the Aristotelian term *automaton* designates the procession of the signifier, which plays out as a constant progressive deferral, *tuché* is the encounter with the Real which this play revolves around, obscuring it without touching it. The orchestrion's performance, its play, is driven by the compulsion of signifiers - *automaton*; when it falters, the subject encounters the Real as an obscenity, *tuché*! If Jurieu's death is passed off as an accident, and Robert, Christine and Octave can appear to have operated within the rules of the game for their audience, the orchestrion's malfunction remains for the audience a less negotiable, far less tractable event installed as a rent in the fabric of the film, beyond accommodation.

An altogether different series of associations are set in motion through the depiction of automata and machines in Vigo's film *L'Atalante*, released, under difficult circumstances,

²⁵ Following the definition of the Real as 'ce qui revient toujours à la même place' (59), in *Le Séminaire Livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 'Points', 1973), Lacan would distinguish between *automaton*, the play of signifiers, and *tuché*, the trauma which disrupts this movement. See especially pages 63-75.

²⁶ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24 X a second* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005).

a few years previously.²⁷ I have already pointed to the ways in which comparison of the two films can underline different attitudes to technology. While in *La Règle du jeu* the representation of the machine is used ironically to point to the false consciousness of the aristocracy, Vigo uses automata partly as a sign of a sympathetic and arguably nostalgic celebration of working-class popular culture. Just as Robert deludes himself that the absence of fences around his property can afford him and his world a freedom which its underlying codes turn out not to permit, and just as he deludes himself that his marriage can accommodate a degree of licence, the obscene machine he unveils is an instance of an inauthentic and second-hand appropriation of the culture of popular entertainment. Like the music hall performances which precede the orchestrion, the machinic object in Renoir's film is a myth in Barthes' sense, a second-order sign which vampirically drains the sense of the initial sign in order to constitute a sign of classless 'bonhomie', immune to social difference and passing itself off as natural and universal.²⁸ In Vigo's film, the reference to working class or popular entertainment, although finely constructed, is devoid of irony; its role is one of human connection and empathy. The listening booth from which Père Jules recovers the errant Juliette in *L'Atalante* facilitates an umbilical connection between Juliette and the affective milieu of the barge, mediated through the song she chooses which draws Père Jules to her in an Orphic manner which also recalls the Surrealist affirmation of *objective chance*. It is also apt to see Vigo's inclusion of the technology of the listening booth as celebratory

²⁷ On Vigo and *L'Atalante* see P.E. Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), Marina Warner, *L'Atalante* (London: BFI Film Classics, 1993); Michael Temple, *Jean Vigo* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

²⁸ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957). See especially the final chapter 'Le Mythe aujourd'hui'.

and nostalgic indexing of popular street culture, connecting his cinematic art with the world of working class entertainment, and with a Surrealist affirmation of the *quotidien*.²⁹ A similar kind of cultural referencing is effected in Père Jules' collection of artefacts, also including wind-up automata, but appealing to the art of everyday experience rather than that of 'high culture'. The central piece of his collection is the puppet conductor, which Père Jules calls 'mon bonhomme', and which he operates, apparently by means of foot pedals, while seated behind it. In contrast to Robert's ostentatious but ineffectual display, Père Jules is obscured by his puppet, and, as with Jurieu in *La Règle du jeu*, accommodated in the apparatus. The shot-reverse-shot editing captures Juliette in an almost humanized dialogue with the figure, which appears to be conducting the music box melody she is operating herself. Père Jules' puppet is also presented in the context of his collection of artefacts, reflecting his global travels, and is given a provenance linked to revolutionary history, as Père Jules adds 'Trouvé

²⁹ This approach, in which cinematic movement is revelatory of the rhythms of everyday life, is especially salient in Vigo's 1930 documentary *A propos de Nice*; Boris Kaufman's camera focuses in on the repetitive, but organic movements of bodies engaged in manual labour (sweeping, washing clothes, shoe-polishing, flower-picking) and entertainment (the dancing girls, the movement of hands in street gambling games, tennis), while also incorporating forms of automatic, machinic movement (of bicycles, a biplane, racing cars) and natural, serial movement (of waves, flocks of birds). The global image is of an organic movement which expresses itself across all its manifestations and synthesised organically, so to speak, by the camera, itself a machine in tune with the pulse of life. As Deleuze points out in *Cinéma 1: L'Image-mouvement* (Paris: Minuit, 1983), following the analyses of Jean-Pierre Bamberger and Barthélemy Amengual, the organic and aquatic rhythms of Nice allow a description in counterpoint of the 'corps monstrueux' of the bourgeoisie (115).

ça à Caracas, pendant la révolution, dix-huit cent... quelque chose...' but it also enters into other constellations, as it is visually juxtaposed with all sorts of other paraphernalia, including the reproduction of an odalisque on the wall behind it. The Caracas puppet is part of a collection, just as the *limonaire* is part of Robert's collection, and to that extent its revolutionary charge risks being neutralized and reified; collecting has a different mode here, and the objects are given other afterlives through the juxtapositions in which they appear. Père Jules' cabin comprises a series of ethnographic objects and ephemera distinct from the museum, reflecting more the kind of encounters celebrated by André Breton in *Nadja*, or in the pages of Surrealist journals such as *Minotaure*, or perhaps, more appropriately – without the notion of synthesis in an ideal – in the iconography of the review *Documents* and of its co-founder Georges Bataille.³⁰ Père Jules is also a collector, but his collection derives from *contact* and direct experience, rather than as a collection of objects already removed from their sources and fetishized as relics of exotic other places or cultures. Père Jules' 'Cabinet of Curiosities' (as Marina Warner puts it) contrasts starkly with Robert de la Chesnaye's collection of musical automata.³¹ It extends too onto his own body; the tattoos he bears are also traces of his passage across other spaces, just as the objects he shows Juliette are indexical connections to his own presence elsewhere. This is an altogether different kind of

³⁰ See Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³¹ Marina Warner, *op. cit.*

collection, which denies fetishism even as it flirts with it.³² The automata which Père Jules makes to perform for Juliette are prosthetic extensions of his body.

The relation of body to machine is also a figure for a mode of production. While the automata of Renoir's film function as reifications of the social disposition of the class which collects them but is hardly in contact with them, spectrally comprising the industrial mechanisms altogether absent from the visual surface of the film, *L'Atalante*, which travels close to this milieu, proposes its heterogeneous machines as prosthetic extensions of the body. If, as I have proposed, Robert's orchestrion appears underpinned by a Lacanian epistemology, wherein its image or semblance falls back to reveal the bare repetition of the Real, the framework within which Vigo's machines are best understood, and to which they perhaps appeal, is Deleuzian. Various fluid conceptual figures in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipe* and *Mille Plateaux*, of the desiring-machine, the assemblage, the *ritournelle*, suggest a notion of the machine as a mode of connection and an arrangement of the flow of energy which connects elements, including subjects, spatially, in a certain territory, allowing for different lines of differential becoming.³³ The term accommodation that I introduced earlier

³² For Deleuze, the objects in Père Jules' collection are: 'les plus extraordinaires fétiches, objets partiels, souvenirs et rebuts, il en fait non pas une mémoire mais une pure mosaïque d'états presents [...]' *Cinéma I*, 115.

³³ See Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) especially Chapter 1, 'Desiring Machines'. It is possible, of course, to read Renoir's orchestrion in relation to the Deleuzian notion of the desiring machine; one might point to its malfunction as an intervention of the 'body without organs', at which the flow and connection of desire ceases or reaches a point of saturation.

might pertain usefully to this adaptive and connective relation to machines and mechanisms. It is visible in the scene of Juliette's embarkation, following the wedding procession, in which she is swung onto the barge on its boom, marking a separation from the territory of the land and its sober rituals from that of the water, an altogether more fluid territory of desire. Vigo's puppet and machines function prosthetically as modes of connection between the human players of his drama, rather than fetishistically in terms of alienation or false consciousness. If they pertain more to the Deleuzian notion of the desiring-machine, while the automata in *La Règle du jeu* invite a less optimistic stress on image, alienation and a disruptive, intractable Real, this distinction reveals as much about the politics of these modes of theorisation as it does about the affective and moral implications of the films themselves. The Deleuzian machine, and human-machine relations in Vigo, allow for creative possibilities; those in *La Règle du jeu* are altogether less mobile.

The machines are also an index of gender relations. *La Règle du jeu*, with its reference to 18th century French theatre of Marivaux and Beaumarchais, implicitly proposes its *jeu* as structured around the exchange of women between men; travesty, reasoned discourse and chance come to disrupt the feudal 'droit de seigneur' in an epochal shift towards an equality in terms of class. But while *Le Mariage de Figaro*, for example, threatens to transgress the boundaries between classes through the excessive play of its role-switching, *La Règle du jeu*, through the parallel it establishes between the potential adulteries of Christine, on the one hand, and her maid Lisette, on the other, keeps these domains rigorously separate. The transgressive figure of the poacher remains within the bounds of pure and unbounded libidinal energy, rather than venturing into the realm of ruse, calculation, and subversive reason embodied by Figaro himself in the play and in the opera. A similar compartmentalisation is evident in Robert's case; his collection of automata are his province, extensions of his neurotic masculinity; they have no direct bearing on his relations to the

women in his life, Christine and Geneviève. Robert's relation to his mechanisms also functions as an implicit index of his masculinity again through contrast with Jurieu. Jurieu's heroism is associated with his position as pilot or driver of the aeroplane and car, the cross-Channel flight expressive of his stamina, and his perhaps deliberate steering of the car into the roadside ditch expressive of excessive, tragic desire. Robert, on the other hand, is feminized by his machines, particularly in the stage scene in which he presents the orchestrion, where his eye shadow and the handkerchief he takes out of his pocket connote feminine display. The encounter between Père Jules and Juliette in the cabin is also a display (Père Jules mutters 'On dirait une vitrine'), confronting Juliette with a series of signs of a polymorphous and exotic sexuality which troubles the conjugal couple she forms with Jean and appeals to her desire. A strong aspect of this seduction is Jules' deliberate self-feminization, which mimics and displaces the authority of the male, and this is particularly visible in his manipulation of the puppet, which obscures and replaces him in the visual frame, whose decrepitude ironically contrasts with Jules' physical bulk, and to whose gestures of command Juliette responds gaily and with complicity. Both Robert and Père Jules are feminized, therefore, and the difference between them should perhaps be sought in their physical position in relation to the machines rather than in the gender roles to which they do or do not conform. Robert stands in front of the orchestrion. Jules is obscured behind the decrepit conductor. Robert 'mock' conducts the automaton which plays its programme; Père Jules manually manipulates the puppet. Robert's movements are redundant, a symptom of his class position and of the relation to the machine which as suggested above, is the contemporary after-image of these reified automata.

These differences can perhaps be explained more straightforwardly by the fact that an automaton is different from a puppet. It signifies a more optimistic but also nostalgic sense of manual labour which from a Marxist point of view might qualify as an ideological masking

of the real conditions of production. *L'Atalante* indeed heroizes and romanticizes the life of the bargemen in contrast to the despair of urban industry and unemployment. If as I proposed earlier the machine and relations to it functions as an index of relations or production, one can say that Vigo's puppet, in keeping with other human-machine relations in *L'Atalante*, privileges a pre-industrial mode of production at the level of cottage-industry.³⁴ While the whole domain of production is visually absent from *La Règle du jeu*, the analysis it proposes of human-machine relations, via Robert's automata, is a more politically acute, albeit pessimistic, account of socio-economic conditions, which refuses and critiques the implicit heroization of manual labour in Vigo's film. Robert's position in front of his automaton, his exaggerated yet ultimately ineffective display, offers an objective parallel to the relation between the capitalist and the means of production of which he is the owner. Robert is the owner and overseer of his machines but neither operates nor manipulates them. Neither does he police the boundaries of the land he owns. His display displays nothing but the display itself, just as the image of capital is empty and insubstantial.

I will conclude with a return to Walter Benjamin. The proposition of puppet and automaton as allegories of history is, of course, a salient feature of Benjamin's essay 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in which we encounter the well-known exemplum of the chess-playing doll:

The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could respond to each move in a game of chess with a countermove that ensured him victory. A puppet

³⁴ The exception would be the depiction of the puppets in an animated sequence at the beginning of Vigo's *A propos de Nice*, in which the satirized puppet bodies of a bourgeois couple are thrown onto a roulette table in an aggressive gesture more symbolic of a class-driven attack on a regime of alienation and false consciousness.

in Turkish attire, and with a hookah in his mouth, sat in front of a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion of a table transparent on all sides. Actually a hunchback dwarf, who was an expert chess player, sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet known as 'historical materialism' is always supposed to win. It can easily be a match for anyone if it ropes in the services of theology, which today, as the story goes, is small and ugly and must, as it is, keep out of sight.³⁵

Much debate has ensued as to the meaning of this enigmatic parable, in which the automaton functions as an allegory of history much in the same way as the 'Angelus Novus' figure which Benjamin draws from Paul Klee at the end of the essay figures a melancholic and Messianic historiography. Benjamin uses the automaton and attendant puppet to figure relations between history and theology, but it also puts into play relations between agency, technology, and illusion which invite us to consider the two examples from Renoir and Vigo in the same manner. Robert's orchestrion is indeed a glorious display, its extravagant illuminated façade one of the distinctive features of the large scale machines manufactured by Limonaire et Cie. The fact that it functions without human intervention, that Robert's performance next to it is entirely ineffectual and redundant, suggests the abdication of human agency in the historical processes of its moment. What its illusory surface hides, and what becomes apparent when the machine is interrupted, is the pure recurrence of its mechanism, in which we might see the paralysis of history and of the class to which Robert belongs. Theology, in the figure of the hunchback dwarf in Benjamin's allegory, is absent here, or has

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968) 253.

coagulated into the Batailleian obscenity of the percussive dolls, on the one hand, and the motor of pure recurrence on the other. The conducting puppet in Père Jules' cabin is also offered as an allegorical figure of history. Like the other objects in the cabin, and drawn from the same contexts, it shares with the objects celebrated by the Surrealists an obsolescence, freed from use-value, but nevertheless haunted by its historical provenance. Père Jules identifies this as revolutionary; he found it in Caracas during the revolution of the 1890s. As with many other details in the film, Vigo encrypts the mythology and iconography of libertarian anarchism into an otherwise sentimental screen play celebrating and reinforcing conjugality. While the object in fact came from the *atelier* of Margiritis's uncle (Margiritis played the *Camelot*) Vigo, or perhaps Michel Simon, who plays Père Jules, endows it with a somewhat exotic historical significance. In contrast to the chess-playing mannequin, everything is visible in Vigo's puppet, there is no hidden agency; yet the decrepit condition of the conductor, and of Père Jules himself evoke a romanticized past. History is present here as a mythology of revolution. It is not the wizened figure of theology which is driving history, but the libidinal and sexually mobile energy of Jules and Juliette, who draw on the tattered figure of revolutionary history to negotiate a partnership and move into the future. With Renoir's automaton, the illusion of the social game performs as it may, but when its functioning falters, it reveals that history has been arrested, and there is no controlling or theological agency to redeem the recurrence of the Real and of death.